

THOMAS CARLYLE ON THE SLAVE QUESTION.

A late number of Fraser's Magazine contains an article, bearing the unmistakable impress of the Anglo-German peculiarities of Thomas Carlyle, entitled "An Occasional Discourse on the Slave Question," which would be interesting as a literary curiosity, were it not in spirit and tendency so unacceptably wicked as to excite in every right-minded reader a feeling of amazement and disgust. With a hard, brutal audacity, a blasphemous irreverence, and a sneering mockery, which would do honor to the devil of Faust, it takes issue with the moral sense of mankind and the precepts of Christianity. Having ascertained that the exports of sugar and spices from the West Indies have diminished since Emancipation, and that the negroes, having worked, as they believed, quite long enough without wages, now refuse to work for the planters without higher pay than the latter, with the thriffling and evil habits of slavery still clinging to them, can afford to give—the author considers himself justified in denouncing Negro Emancipation as one of the "shams" which he was specially sent into this world to belabor. He has confined himself to simple abuse and caricature of the self-feeding and Christian abolitionists of England—the broad-brimmed philanthropists of Exeter Hall—there would have been small occasion for noticing his spurious and discreditable production. Doubtless there is a faint philanthropy—the alloy of human frailty and folly—in the most righteous reforms, which is a fair subject for the indignant ascription of a professed hatred of shows and falshies. Whatever is hollow and hypocritical in politics, morals, or religion, comes very properly within the scope of his mockery, and we bid him God speed in playing his satirical lash upon it. Impostures and deceptions of all kinds deserve nothing better than detection and exposure. Let him blow them to the winds of heaven, as Daniel did the image of Bel and the Dragon.

But our author, in this matter of negro slavery, has undertaken to apply his explosive pitch and resin, not to the affliction of humanity, but to humanity itself. He mocks at pity, and at all who seek to lessen the amount of pain and suffering, sneers at and denies an entire class of rights, and mercilessly consigns an entire class of the children of his Heavenly Father to the doom of compulsory servitude. He vituperates the poor black man with a coarse brutality, or a rude credit to a Mississippi slave-driver, or a rascally Yankee dealer in human cattle on the banks of the Potomac. His rhetoric has a flavor of the slave-pan and action-bacon—rueful, unmanly, indecent, and sordid—couched upon good words and refined feeling, which at once degrades the author and insults his readers.

He assumes (for he is one of those sublimated philosophers who reject the Baconian system of induction, and depend upon intuition, without recourse to facts and figures) that the emancipated class in the West India islands are universally idle, improvident, and unfit for freedom; that God created them to be the servants and slaves of their "born lords," the white men, and designed them to grow sugar, coffee, and spices, for their masters, instead of raising pumpkins and yams for themselves; and that, if they will not do this, "the beneficent whip" should be again employed to compel them. He adopts, in speaking of the black class, the lowest slang of vulgar prejudice, "Black Quashee," sneers the gentlemanly philosopher, "black Quashee," if he will not help in bringing out the spices, will get himself made a slave again, (which state will be a little less ugly than his present one), and with beneficent whip, since other methods avail not, will be compelled to work.

It is difficult to treat sentiments so atrocious, and couched in such offensive language, with anything like respect. Common sense and unperverted conscience revolt instinctively against them. The doctrine they inculcate is that which underlies all tyranny and wrong of man towards man. It is that under which "the creation groweth and travaileth unto this day." It is as old as sin; as perpetual argument of Strength against Weakness, of Power against Right—that of the Greek philosopher, that the barbarians, being of an inferior race, were born to be slaves to the Greeks; and of the infidel Hobbes, that every man, being by nature at war with every other man, has a perpetual right to reduce him to servitude, if he has the power. It is the cardinal doctrine of that John Quincy Adams has very properly styled "the Satanic School of Philosophy"—the ethics of an old Norse sea-robber, or an Arab plunderer of caravans. It is as widely removed from the "sweet humanities" and unselfish benevolence of Christianity, as the faith and practice of the East India Thug or the New Zealand cannibal.

Our author does not, however, take us altogether by surprise. He has before given no uncertain intimation of the point towards which his philosophy was tending. In his brilliant essay upon Paragony, for instance, we find him entering with morose satisfaction, and admiration into the details of his hero's tyranny. In his "Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell"—in half a dozen pages of savage and almost diabolical sarcasm directed against the growing humanity of the age, the "rose-pink sentimentalists," and squeamishness which shudders at the sight of blood and indiction of pain—he prepares the way for a justification of the massacre of Drogheda. More recently, he has intimated that the extermination of the Celtic race is the best way of settling the Irish question, and that the enslavement and forcible transportation of his poor, to labor under armed task-masters in the colonies, is the only rightful and proper remedy for the political and social evils of England. In the Discourse on Negro Slavery we see this devilish philosophy in full bloom. The gods, he tells us, are with the strong. Might is a Divine right to rule—blessed are the crafts of brain and strong of hand. Weakness is crime. "Ye Vipers" as Brennus said when he threw his sword into the scale. Woe to the conquered. The negro is weaker in intellect than his "born lord," the white man, and has no right to choose his own vocation. Let the latter do for him, and, if need be, return to the "beneficent whip." "On the side of the oppressor there is power;" let him use it without mercy, and hold flesh and blood to the grindstone with unrelenting rigor. Humanity is squeamishness; pity for the suffering, mere "rose-pink sentimentalism;" maul him and maul him. The gods (the old Norse gods, doubtless) laugh to scorn all the complaints of the miserable and the weak, compassions and "philanthropisms" of those who would relieve them. This is the substance of Thomas Carlyle's advice: this is the mature fruit of his philosophic husbandry—the grand result for which he has been all his life sounding "unfathomable abysses," or beating about in the thin air of Transcendentalism. Such is the substitute which he offers us for the Sermon on the Mount!

He tells us that the blacks have no right to use the islands of the West Indies for growing pumpkins and garden stuffs for their own use and behoof, because they are not white, and the whites, that they have no right to the islands, because they are not black, and therefore have a right to the benefits of his own backward of land and "two-legged cattle." "Black Quashee" has no right to dispose of himself and his labor, because he owes his partial civilization to others! And pray how has it been with the white race, for whom our philosopher claims the divine prerogative of enslaving? Some twenty centuries ago, a pair of half-baked savages, dandied with paint, might have been seen roaming among the hills and woods of the northern part of the British island, subsisting on acorns and the flesh of wild animals, with an occasional relic of the smoked hams and pickled fowls of some unfortunate Briton caught on the wrong side of the Tweed. This interesting couple reared as they best could a family of children, who, in turn, became the

heirs of families, and some time about the beginning of the present century, one of their descendants in the borough of Ekelebach rejoiced over the birth of a man child, now somewhat famous as "Thomas Carlyle, a maker of books." Does it become such an one to rave against the West India negro's incapacity for self-civilization? Unaided by the arts, sciences, and refinements of the Romans, he might have been, at this very age, equated on his naked haunches in the woods of Ekelebach, painting his weather-hardened epidermis in the sun, like his Pict ancestors. Where, in fact, can we look for unaided self-improvement and spontaneous intellectual development, to any considerable extent, on the part of any nation or people? From people to people the original God-given impulse towards civilization and perfection has been transmitted, as from Egypt to Greece, and thence to the Roman world.

But the blacks, we are told, are indolent, and insensible to the duty of raising sugar and coffee and spices for the whites, being mainly occupied to provide for their own household, and till their own gardens, for domestic comforts and necessities. The exports have fallen off somewhat. And what does this prove? Only that the negro is now a consumer of products, of which, under the rule of the whip, he was a producer. mere wages, we have reason to believe that the charge is not sustained. If untidy habits and lack of prudence on the part of the owners of estates, combined with the repeal of duties on foreign sugars by the British Government, have placed it out of their power to pay just and reasonable wages for labor, who can blame the blacks, if they prefer to cultivate their own garden plots, rather than raise sugar and spices for their late masters, upon terms little better than those of their old condition, the "beneficent whip" always excepted? The despatches of the colonial Governors agree in admitting that the blacks have had great cause for complaint and dissatisfaction, owing to the delay or non-payment of their wages. Sir G. E. Grey, writing from Jamaica, says that "in a good many instances the payment of the wages they have earned has been very irregularly made, or not at all, probably on account of the inability of employers." He says, moreover—

"The negroes appear to me to be generally as free from rebellious tendencies or turbulent feelings, and malicious thoughts, as any race of laborers I ever saw or heard of. My impression is, indeed, that under a system of perfectly fair dealing and of real justice, they will come to be a faithful, industrious and yomany, able-bodied, industrious and hard-working, frank and well-disposed."

As we are judged by admitted, that judging by their diminished exports, and the growing complaints of the owners of estates, that the condition of the islands, in a financial point of view, is by no means favorable. An immediate cause of this, however, must be found in the unfortunate Sugar act of 1846. The more remote, but for the most part powerful cause of the present depression, is to be traced to the vicious and unnatural system of slavery, which has been gradually but surely preparing the way for ruin, bankruptcy, and demoralization. Never yet, by a community or an individual, have the righteous laws of God been violated with impunity. Sooner or later comes the penalty which the Infinite Justice has affixed to sin. Partial and temporary evils and inconveniences have undoubtedly resulted from the emancipation of the laborers; and many years must elapse before the relations of the two heretofore antagonistic classes can be perfectly adjusted, and their interests brought into entire harmony. But that Freedom is not to be held mainly accountable for the depression of the British colonies, is obvious from the fact that Dutch Surinam, where the old system of slavery remains in its original rigor, is in an equally depressed condition. The *Paramaribo News and Advertiser* of January 2, 1850—around us we hear nothing but complaints. People seek and find matter in everything to picture to themselves the lot of a place in which they live as better than that of any other country. "Of a large number of flourishing plantations, few remain that can now be called such. So deteriorated has property become within the last few years, that many of these estates have not been able to defray their weekly expenses." "The colony stands on the brink of a yawning abyss, into which it must inevitably plunge, unless new and better system is speedily adopted." "It is impossible that our agriculture can any longer proceed on its old footing; our laboring force is dying away, and the social position they held must undergo a revolution."

The paper from which we have quoted, the official journal of the colony, thinks the condition of the emancipated British colonies decidedly preferable to that of Surinam, where the old slave system has continued in force, and insists that the Dutch Government must follow the example of Great Britain. The actual condition of the British colonies since emancipation is perfectly well known in Surinam; of three them, Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice, being its immediate neighbors, whatever evils and inconveniences have resulted from emancipation must be well understood by the Dutch slaveholders, yet we find them looking towards emancipation, as the only prospect of remedy for the greater evils of their own system. This fact is of itself a sufficient answer to the assumption of Carlyle and others, that what they call "the ruin of the colonies" has been produced by the Emancipation acts of 1833 and 1838.

We have no space whatever of the effect of this literary monstrosity which we have been considering, upon the British colonies. Quashee, black and ignorant as he may be, will not "get himself made a slave again." The mission of the "beneficent whip" is there pretty well over; and it may now find its place in museums and cabinets of ghastly curiosities, with the racks, pincers, thumb-screws, and branding-irons, of old days. What we have feared, however, is, that the advocates and defenders of slaveholding in this country find in this "Discourse" matter of encouragement, and that our anti-Christian prejudices against the colored man might be strengthened and confirmed by his malignant vituperation and sarcasm. On this point we have sympathized with the forebodings of an eloquent writer in the *London Express*.

We cannot imagine a more deadly moral poison than the "Discourse" of Carlyle to the last composition. Every cruel practice of social exclusion will derive from it new sharpness and venom. The slaveholder, of course, will exult to find himself not apologized for, but enthusiastically cheered, upheld, and glorified by a writer of European celebrity. But it is not merely the slave who will feel Mr. Carlyle's hand in the torture of his flesh, the riveting of his fetters, and the denial of light to his mind. A free black man will feel him too, in Illinois, Ohio, and elsewhere, where he is a free man, and his brother man, who will easily derive from this unfortunate essay the belief, that his inhuman feelings are of Divine ordination. It is a true work of the Devil, the fostering of tyrannical prejudice, and wide over space, and long into the future, the winged words of evil counsel will go. In the market-places, in the house, in the theatre, and in the church—by land and by sea—in all the haunts of men, and in the bosom of the unprincipled and malignant growth of hate and scorn, and suffering and resentment. Amongst the sufferers will be many to whom education has given every refined susceptibility that makes contempt and derision feel like blows, and to whom faithful and disinterested, loving and worthy to be loved, and bearing, it may be, no more than an almost imperceptible trace of African descent, will continue yet longer to be banished from the social fold of the white man, and to be pursued from his presence by a writer of European celebrity. But it is not merely the slave who will feel Mr. Carlyle's hand in the torture of his flesh, the riveting of his fetters, and the denial of light to his mind. 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